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## SECRETS, LIES AND NON-EVENTS: THE PRODUCTION OF CAUSALITY AND SELF-DECONSTRUCTION IN TONI MORRISON'S *GOD HELP THE CHILD*

SECRETOS, MENTIRAS E INTRANSCENDENCIA. LA PRODUCCIÓN DE CAUSALIDAD Y AUTODECONSTRUCCIÓN EN *LA NOCHE DE LOS NIÑOS*, DE TONI MORRISON.

Paula Martín Salván

University of Córdoba<sup>1</sup>  
[paula.martin@uco.es](mailto:paula.martin@uco.es)

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### Abstract:

This essay offers a reading of *God Help the Child* (2015), Toni Morrison's latest novel to date, from the perspective of Jonathan Culler's seminal contribution to narratology in *The Pursuit of Signs* and *Structuralist Poetics*, focusing particularly on three related aspects: the textual production of causality, the role of events and the eventful in narrative, and the self-deconstructive nature of particular texts. Morrison's novel is articulated as a bold reworking of revelatory narrative structures organized around the reconstruction of a primal event at the story level which is only hinted at through analepsis in the diegetic present, by calling into question naturalized relations of cause-effect between events in a temporal sequence. The relevance of Morrison's structure in *God Help the Child* can be better appreciated in the light of debates, in the field of narratology, about the definition of narrativity in terms of sequentiality, eventfulness and causality, and their deconstruction by post-structuralist narrative theory. Ultimately, my essay aims at

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pointing to a moment of self-deconstruction in the novel, exposed in the problematic realization that the primal event in this story is actually a non-event, one which apparently never happened.

**Keywords:** Event; Non-Event; Causality; Sequence; Revelation; Secrecy; Confession; Trauma; Deconstruction.

### Resumen:

El presente trabajo presenta una lectura de *La noche de los niños* (2015), última novela de Toni Morrison, desde la contribución de Jonathan Culler en *The Pursuit of Signs and Structuralist Poetics* a la narratología, atendiendo esencialmente a tres aspectos vinculados entre sí: la producción textual de la causalidad, el papel de los acontecimientos y lo acontecimental en la narrativa, así como la naturaleza auto deconstructiva de ciertos textos. La novela de Morrison está articulada como una audaz reelaboración de las estructuras narrativas estructurada en torno a la reconstrucción de un acontecimiento primigenio de la trama que solamente se insinúa a través de la analepsis en el presente diegético mediante el cuestionamiento de las relaciones naturalizadas de causa-efecto entre los acontecimientos de la secuencia temporal de la novela. La relevancia de la estructura utilizada por Morrison en *La noche de los niños* puede apreciarse a la luz de los debates que se han venido produciendo en el ámbito de la narratología sobre la definición de la narratividad en términos de secuencialidad, acontecimentalidad y causalidad, así como la deconstrucción llevada a cabo por la teoría postestructuralista sobre la narrativa. Por último, este trabajo aspira a señalar el momento de autodeconstrucción de la novela, revelado ante la problemática comprensión de que el acontecimiento primigenio de la trama es, en realidad, un no-acontecimiento, algo que aparentemente nunca sucedió.

**Palabras clave:** No-acontecimiento; Causalidad; Revelación; Secretismo; Confesión; Trauma; Deconstrucción.

### I. Trauma stories and self-deconstruction

In the chapter he devotes to the narratological distinction between story and discourse in *The Pursuit of Signs* (1981), Jonathan Culler focuses his attention on narratives that “include a moment of self-deconstruction” (183). Culler’s approach to the irreducible undecidability presented by some texts in their plot structure remains a key contribution to the study of narrative form, as it problematizes the notions of event, causality and the assumed prevalence of the realm of the story over that of discourse in most contemporary narratology. In this essay, I would like to return to Culler’s seminal contribution, focusing particularly on

three related aspects: the textual production of causality, the role of events and the eventful in narrative, and the self-deconstructive nature of particular texts. My discussion will explore these issues in a recent narrative text, *God Help the Child* (2015), Toni Morrison's latest novel to date.

Like many of Morrison's previous novels, *God Help the Child* follows what we could tentatively call a revelatory pattern. Most of Toni Morrison's fiction indeed seems to have a revelatory narrative structure, that is to say, one that hinges on a crucial event which occupies a past position in the sequence of narrated events (at the level of discourse) and which determines to a large extent the narrative situation depicted in the novel's diegetic present.<sup>2</sup> This kind of event equally determines the course of the narrative in its further development, to the extent that this may be said to organize around the process of unveiling it.<sup>3</sup> At the end of the novel, borrowing J. Hillis Miller's expression, we may get "the revelation of the law of the whole" (1992, 18): the final rearranging of information that will allow for the mental reconstruction, on the part of the reader, of the "true" and "complete" sequence of events affecting the characters' trajectories as narrated in the novel.

This kind of narrative, which turns the reader into a detective and the story into a quest for a buried truth, may be obviously traced back to classic literature, with *Oedipus King* standing traditionally as the first example of its kind, as authors like Culler himself or Peter Brooks have pointed out. The narrative structure thus created is to be found as well, as Culler suggests, in the workings of psychoanalytic understanding, which also "involves reconstructing a story, tracing a phenomenon back to its origin" (2002, 178-9). The plot structure of *God Help the Child* doubly exemplifies the workings of revelation in narrative, as it does not only follow the convention of narrative as revelation, but explicitly draws on the psychoanalytical method, which Culler depicts as aiming at "the revelation of a decisive event which, when placed in the true sequence of events, can be seen as the cause of the patient's present situation" (2002, 179). Unraveling present time symptoms through therapy may eventually lead to that original event, thus re-establishing a true sequence of events organized in terms of causality. This, as Peter Brooks observes as well, is the narrative logics of Freud's case histories, "finding the chain of events leading from the initial trauma, usually infantile, to its sexualized repetition, usually during adolescence, on to the present symptoms" thus providing "a seamless narrative that was thought to be cathartic and therefore in itself curative" (1992, 280).

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2. As an anecdote confirming this, it could be mentioned that the cover of the novel, in its paperback editions, includes the epigraph "the past has a hold like no other". This epigraph epitomizes the narrative logic not only of this, but also of other novels by Morrison like *Sula*, *Tar Baby*, *Beloved* or *A Mercy*.

3. Culler, following Barthes' theorization on the hermeneutic code of narrative, comments on how enigmas may "lead to a structuring of the text" (1975, 212).

*God Help the Child* follows closely this pattern, with Bride as protagonist/patient whose story needs to be reconstructed in order to be properly understood. The narrative of Bride's life is presented as a trauma story, in which an event from her past works as the psychological and narrative key to understand all subsequent events in her life, including the identity crisis on which the diegetic present is focused. As a trauma story, Bride's seems to be a relatively simple one: as a child, she witnessed how her kindergarten teacher abused other children, and bore testimony against her in trial. That Bride has apparently managed to work through her trauma is evinced by the fact that, in the course of the novel, she tells about it to her friend Brooklyn and to her boyfriend Booker.<sup>4</sup> The novel begins just as Sofia Huxley, the woman accused and convicted for child molestation, is about to be released from prison after a fifteen-year sentence. This is signaled in the text as the trigger for Bride's identity crisis, which from the psychoanalytical perspective can be read in terms of the return of the repressed, as she associates her visit to Sofia to feelings of guilt, vulnerability and what appears to be a psychosomatic acting out of an actually unresolved trauma, as she seems to be physically returning to prepubescence.<sup>5</sup> It can be perceived as an incoherent element in Bride's life story, thus affirming Peter Brooks' observation that, in psychological analysis, psychic health is identified to "a coherent narrative account of one's life" (1992, 282), so that "illness amounts at least in part to suffering from an incoherent story or an inadequate narrative account of oneself" (282).

However, Bride's trauma story is complicated in ways that require specific attention. Near the end of the novel, revelation is very explicitly dramatized in the course of a fight between Bride and her ex-boyfriend Booker, who decided to dump her after learning she intended to visit Sofia, the child molester. Pressed by him into justifying her decision to visit the woman she helped put in jail, Bride confesses: "'I lied! I lied! I lied! She was innocent. I helped convict her but she didn't do any of that' [...] 'You lied? What the hell for?' 'So my mother would hold my hand!'" (Morrison 2015, 153).

Bride's confession constitutes, I think, a fascinating turning point in the narrative, in several senses: 1. It reveals another, truly repressed trauma, related to her perception (confirmed in the first chapter of the novel) that her mother was repelled by her. 2. It shows that the key event on which the entire narrative hinges, and which explained Bride's psychological development as a character, never took place. 3. It foregrounds the relevance of pragmatics in narrative, by focusing on two key speech acts, a confession and a lie, as the

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4. See LaCapra 1987, 21-22, on the distinction between "acting out" and "working through" in psychoanalytical theory and trauma studies. Specifically, Ruth Leys (2010, 104, n. 34) explains the working through of trauma in terms of the Freudian conception of the passage from repetition compulsion to conscious recollection, as follows: "the repetition of repressed affects [...] was to be converted into recollection."

5. Leys (2010, 31-32) defines acting out in the context of trauma theory as the repetition of an experience which is not completely repressed, but emerges in the present in distorted repetition compulsion.

motors of the narration. 4. It forces a reconsideration of the whole story on the basis of this new information. 5. It complicates the interpretation of preceding events, particularly when it comes to explain what *really* happened with Sofia. As will be argued, Bride's confession obscures more than it clarifies the identification of the events in the story.

All these aspects, finally, come together in the consideration that Bride's confession constitutes a self-deconstructive moment in the plot, in the sense that it creates a situation of undecidability around "the priority of events and the determination of event by structures of signification" (Culler 2002, 179). If the original event in Bride's life story was actually made up, its imaginary nature does not change the fact that it determined the character's trajectory in significant ways, thus confirming Culler's claim when analyzing Freud's case study of the Wolf Man: "from the point of view of narratology, and also from the point of view of the engaged reader, the difference between an event of the plot and an imaginary event is irreducible" (2002, 181). Thus, we may conclude with Freud, that whether the original event in Bride's personal trajectory was invented or real is not decisively important (Culler 2002, 180), in that both perspectives would give us the same narrative sequence.

## II. Cause, event, sequence

Morrison's novel is articulated as a bold reworking of the revelatory narrative structure, by calling into question the assumed logics of such textual construction. In establishing an alternative sequence of events which is only revealed near the end, forcing a reconsideration of the entire story, as well as a reassessment of the character's psychological development, the author problematizes naturalized relations of cause-effect between events in a temporal sequence. The relevance of Morrison's structure in *God Help the Child* can be better appreciated in the light of debates, in the field of narratology, about the definition of narrativity in terms of sequentiality, eventfulness and causality, and their deconstruction by post-structuralist narrative theory.

To begin with, the revelatory structure of this novel emphasizes the relevance of sequentiality in narrative. Narratologists like Peter Hühn have repeatedly insisted that the idea of sequence is perhaps the most basic parameter for the identification of narrativity. Texts organized as a psychological or detectivesque investigation foreground this aspect, by thematizing the process of reading as one fundamentally concerned with the reconstruction of the right or true sequence of events. Assuming that there is such a thing as "a real or proper temporal order" (Culler 2002, 171) is one of the implicit tenets of narrative analysis.

The establishment of categories such as the unnarrated (Warhol 2008) or the disnarrated (Prince 1988) point to the need to fill in the gaps and blanks in narration, or to smooth out the discursive wrinkles in the shape of textual renderings of non-occurrences. In both cases,

the idea that reading is about reconstructing a previously established sequence of incidents from which narrative discourse is one among many potential renderings is assumed.

As summarized by Culler, the distinction between story and discourse considers the latter as “the discursive presentation or narration of events” (2002, 170), thus assuming the priority of events over their arrangement in narrative form: “events, conceived as prior to and independent of their discursive representation, determine meanings” (173).<sup>6</sup> Although Culler was describing the panorama of narrative theory in the 1980s, the hierarchical understanding of the story-discourse dichotomy is still prevalent in most narratological approaches to the concept of “event” as an invariant core “against which the variables of narrative presentation can be measured” (Culler 2002, 170; also 1975, 205).

The definition of narrative is inextricably associated to the idea of a sequence of happenings or incidents usually called “events” (Hühn 2010, 1; 2008, 141, 145; 2017, 320; Schmid 2003, 24). When referring to the concept of “event” in narrative, Peter Hühn depicts it in terms signaling the mechanism whereby something stands out: “something more *crucial* in addition to mere succession and change: an *unexpected, exceptional* or *new* turn in the sequential dimension, some *surprising* ‘point’, some *significant* departure from the established course of incidents” (2010, 2; emphasis added). As pertinent as the criterion of relevance in connection to the definition of the event is, in my view, the background against which its ontological status is predicated. Thus, the ideas of “mere succession and change” and “the established course of incidents” are key expressions in Hühn’s definition. Narratological discussions on the notion of event seem to take as their departure point the inevitable deviation from a pre-established course of incidents/action that an event entails. The happening or not of a particular incident identified as an “event” is understood, therefore, on its capacity to produce “decisive change or turn” (ibid).

This decisive nature of an event determines its heightened significance in a narrative (Hühn 2017, 320), in that it produces a specific turn of the story in a particular direction, and no other. Thus, temporal succession or contiguity is articulated as causality, as each event unequivocally leads to another, the latter being perceived as the consequence or result of the former. “Causation involves a narrative structure in which we posit first the presence of a cause and then the production of an effect”, Culler writes (2002, 183). In the field of narratology, the consideration that causality is a key element in the definition of a narrative element as an event is attributed to Tomashevsky (Schmid 2003, 19-20). Culler, paraphrasing Barthe’s *Le degré zero de l’écriture*, writes in *Structuralist Poetics* that literature turns life into destiny (1975, 199), and refers to this as the “teleological de-

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6. See also Jacques Derrida’s take on the same idea in *Given Time* (1991): “One generally thinks that narrative discourse reports events that have taken place outside of it and before it” (121).



termination” of plot, according to which “certain things happen in order that the *récit* my develop as it does” (2002, 209).

The notion of causality in narrative theory, however, remains a problematic one. Culler reminds us of Nietzsche’s account of causality as a trope, through which cause-effects relationship are built retrospectively (2002, 183). In the face of a given situation, we look for an explanation about its origin, and we retrospectively connect the two in a causal relation. This rhetorical mechanism constitutes the principle guiding revelatory structures in the fields of narrative, psychoanalysis and forensic science. Yet, as Culler warns, being conscious about the production of causation in narrative does not necessarily involve that the notion of cause can be entirely discarded.

Contrary to the belief frequently expressed by narratologists that cause can be reduced to sequence in the definition of the eventfulness of plot, so that it cannot be considered a necessary aspect of narrativity (see Rimmon-Kenan, qtd. in Hühn 2008, 142; Schmid 2003, 19-20), Culler’s and Brooks’ contention is that the production of causality is a fundamental element of narrative plotting: “Chronological sequence may not settle the issue of cause: events may gain traumatic significance by deferred action (*Nachträglichkeit*) or retroaction, action working in reverse sequence to create a meaning that did not previously exist” (Brooks 1992, 280). Brooks’ contention is that even if causation is considered as a retroactive projection, it still has the performative capacity to generate meaning.

Trauma narratives like *God Help the Child* emphasize the determining force of original events, by underscoring the causal relations between events in a character’s life trajectory from a psychological perspective. Through analepsis, the events from what Freud called the “prehistoric period of childhood” (qtd. Brooks 1992, 272), anterior to the diegetic present, should be reconstituted in order to provide an explanation as to the characters’ adult selves. In Morrison’s novel, the two main characters, Bride and Booker, may be said to have become the adults they are because of their respective original traumas. Booker’s aunt, Queen, expresses this idea in explaining how his brother’s murder marked in a determinant way the trajectory to be followed by the male protagonist: “Adam’s death became his own life” (Morrison 2015, 147).

This novel, however, belongs to a particular kind of narrative, identified by Culler with the term self-deconstructive, and described as one in which the discursive production of causation is explicitly revealed (2002, 183-4). These are narratives which “identify their own tropological production” (2002, 184). The same character who identifies the causal determination in her nephew’s life, Queen, hints at this acknowledgment of the retrospective production of causality just a few pages later, in a very explicit way: “Each will cling to a sad little story of hurt and sorrow—some long ago trouble and pain life dumped on their pure

and innocent selves. And each one *will rewrite that story forever, knowing the plot, guessing the theme, inventing its meaning and dismissing its origin*" (Morrison 2015, 158, emphasis added). Queen's words suggest an endless process of reinterpretation of the characters' past, in which meanings will be retroactively attributed and the primal event will simultaneously originate the plot and be evacuated from it as an irrecoverable point of origin.

In *God Help the Child*, as was anticipated in the preceding section of this essay, Morrison foregrounds the production of causality in narratives of revelation in another, much more spectacular and problematic way. What if the event granting the tellability of the story was not there? Not simply lost in the characters' psychological mechanism of post-traumatic repression, but rather as a non-occurrence. What if the crucial incident from which the "eventfulness" of the story derived did actually never happen? The question asked by Derrida in *Given Time* in reference to Charles Baudelaire's short story "Counterfeit Money" is pertinent here: "Can one create an event? Can one make history, make a story, can one *make* in general on the basis or with the help of a simulacrum?" (120). In *God Help the Child* the answer would apparently be positive, but the novel is precisely constructed on the basis of the problematic status of its central event as one which is not prior to the act of narration, but rather gets to be constructed through it. Like Freud's case history of the Wolf Man, Morrison works with a narrative in which two alternative versions coexist as "a structure of indeterminacy" (Brooks 1992, 275; also Culler 2002, 181). Brooks' words regarding Freud's work are applicable to Morrison's text: "they constitute and either or, a moment of sequential and causal undecidability which may revise our very conception of the narrative interrelationship of event" (1992, 275).

### III. Non-event

The notion of non-event in narrative has been considered by narratology from different perspectives. While strict approaches to the concept of event and eventfulness consider the factuality or reality as an indispensable requirement for a narrative element to be identified as an event (Schmid 2003, 24), other authors have explored the situations in which the not happening of something may play an important role in the development of narrative.

Gerald Prince, in a special issue of *Style* published in 1988, coined the concept of "the disnarrated" to refer to "those passages in a narrative that consider what did not or does not take place" (Prince 1). Prince's concern is particularly with moments of speculation about the possibility of an alternative development of narrative sequence, a rhetorical mechanism which, through presentation of a potential alternate diegetic world, actually reinforces the notion of causality and sequentiality in narrative. "What if" situations underscore



how different events may lead to different narrative sequences, confirming an understanding of sequentiality in which each event works as determinant origin for the next. Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853) or Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) may be cited as classical examples making a dramatic use of such narrative mechanism.

More recently, Peter Hühn has devoted specific attention to what he calls "non-events", "examples where the (unexpected) non-occurrence of an (expected) event has to be understood as eventful" (2017, 320). Hühn focuses on how the non-occurrence of something in a story may still have a determinant role in the development of the sequence: "the non-occurrence of an event—in analogy to a manifest event—ultimately functions as the point or decisive turn of the story and constitutes its tellability" (2017, 333). Nevertheless, it should be observed that Hühn's understanding of non-events still depends on the notion of deviation from an expected sequence in order to mark them as significant narrative triggers/occurrences. Their exceptionality, in this case, would be reversely constructed through previous expectation. That is to say, if the exceptional and unexpected are the conditions for a manifest event (Hühn 2008, 145), the expected is the precondition for a non-event to be considered eventful (Hühn 2017, 323). Wakefield not returning home on a given evening in Nathaniel Hawthorne's celebrated short story (1835) may work as a simple illustration of the eventfulness of a non-event.

At first glance, the situation presented in *God Help the Child* presents some similarities with the description of non-events offered by Hühn. Bride's confession about the non-occurrence of the foundational incident in her life story fulfills the conditions of being decisive, unexpected (in the light of previous knowledge accumulated by the reader until this point in the narrative) and therefore eventful. Moreover, as Hühn notes, eventful non-occurrence raises questions about reasons, causes, significance, which are fundamental in Morrison's novel.

What this approach fails to consider is the narrative's resistance to the determining force of causality. Here, Culler's comments on the Freudian approach to the logic of psychoanalytic revelation are illuminating. A non-event which, in spite of its not having taken place, determines a particular line of action is, as Hühn rightly points out, just a different kind of event. What Culler is identifying, however, is a different kind of signifying structure: one in which the verification of something as event is actually irrelevant to the course of the story, in the sense that its occurrence (or not) does not change the subsequent sequence of incidents. This is what Freud is implicitly envisioning when claiming that, in the Wolf Man's case, it is actually not important whether the original memory of the parents' copulation was an authentic one or one retrospectively projected as a fantasy. To the Wolf Man, who has constructed his identity on the basis of a trauma

crystallized around this primal scene, the verification of the event is irrelevant, as it does not change the complex acting out of his trauma. As explained by Peter Brooks, “in the place of a primal scene we would have a primal phantasy, operating as event by deferred action” (1992, 276).

Similarly, in *God Help the Child*, Bride’s confession about her false accusation of Sofia does not change the sequence of subsequent events. As will be argued in further detail in the next section, if Bride’s witnessing of child molestation would have been a true one, nothing would have actually changed in the sequence of events in the story, nor in her psychological development as a character. Here, Robyn Warhol’s comments on a particular kind of narrative strategy may be relevant for the specification of the kind of non-event presented in Morrison’s novel. She discusses films in which “first-time viewers realize that the diegetic world is not what it seemed to be” (2008, 229) forcing a reconsideration of the previous sequence of events on the part of the viewers.<sup>7</sup> She claims that “the filmic narrative has presented the same story all along, while the difference comes in interpretation of what happened, not in presentation of what happened” (229). In *God Help the Child*, references to Bride’s witnessing of Sofia’s alleged abuses, taken as references to a *true* event at first, would have to be reconsidered in the new scenario created by her confession. To what extent does Bride’s revelation illuminate previous events in the novel, inviting a reinterpretation of the same? Perhaps the most important event connected to this issue is Sofia’s reaction upon identifying Bride as one of the children who testified against her. Can the same fragment remain intact in its textual coherence when contemplated from the perspective of this new knowledge? In an exercise of rereading worthy of Pierre Menard, we discover that Bride’s confession does not actually change the function this event plays in the narrative, nor the interpretation of its causes.

Perhaps the clue to the nature of the non-event presented in *God Help the Child* lies in its performative power. When considering the conditions for an event to be considered as such, Schmid underscores that “changes of state which are wished for, imagined or dreamed are not events” (2003, 24), in that events need to be “real” in the diegetic world. Bride’s lie about Sofia belongs to the same realm of what is not real in the diegetic world. Yet, its consequences are very real (Sofia’s imprisonment, to begin with) and they fundamentally alter the diegetic world.

Considering the nature of lies, we may consider how pragmatics has traditionally perceived lying as a “speech act of an assertive kind” (Austin 1975, 40). This is underscored by J. Hillis Miller when he argues that “a lie is a way to do things with words if you can get

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7. She mentions Bryan Singer’s *The Usual Suspects* as example, although films like M. Night Shyamalan’s *The Sixth Sense* or novels like Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* could be mentioned as well.

people to believe the lie and act on that belief" (2001, 21-22). This is precisely the case with Bride's lie in *God Help the Child*. From this perspective, then, Bride's lie performatively transforms reality within the diegetic world, so that all subsequent events in the novel may be said to spring from this initial moment when the occurrence or non-occurrence of the event itself becomes irrelevant in the face of the performative force of Bride's speech act.

There are two perspectives, I would claim, from which to tackle the problem of this particular kind of non-event in narrative terms: One would be that of character psychology, from which the eventfulness of something may be measured in terms of its psychological impact in the character's development. This might be related to Hühn's consideration of Monika Fludernik's contention that "events do not constitute narrativity in themselves but only through their emotional and evaluative overload" (Hühn 2010, 2, n. 6; see Fludernik 2003). In this sense, the relevance of the original event in *God Help the Child* would be assessed not in terms of its actual happening in the diegetic world, but on the psychological significance it is attributed for the development of the character. This replicates Brooks' assumption regarding Freud's consideration of the Wolf Man's case history, that an individual is "a structure of the fictions he tells about himself" (1992, 277). The second perspective would be more strictly textual, the one adopted by Culler, according to which the problem of eventfulness is one inextricably linked to textual undecidability and, in a Derridean sense, to the idea of the literary secret. This involves considering how Bride's lie, and particularly its revelation through her confession of it, constitutes a self-deconstructive moment in the novel, in which the idea of an original event is simultaneously confirmed and cancelled. Again, the novel works here in a way reminiscent of Freud's treatment of the Wolf Man case: "This 'solution' might appear irresponsible, an abandonment of all distinction between the fictional and the non-fictional" (Brooks 1992, 276).<sup>8</sup>

#### IV. Confessions, secrets and lies

In *About Time*, Mark Currie refers to the connection between the practice of psychoanalytic therapy and narrative logics, in terms reminiscent of the ones used by Culler and Brooks, as cited above: "In the Freudian tradition, psychoanalysis operates on the assumption that mental disturbance is a state of self-ignorance to be overcome in the moment of narration by self-knowledge" (63). Currie's approach to the issue, however, introduces an additional

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8. That Brooks uses precisely the term *irresponsible* to refer to the textual rendering of the case seems particularly pertinent in the light of Derrida's exploration of literature as the realm where a radical form of irresponsibility is grounded. Considering that literature is the realm where the writer has "authorization to say everything", he claims that this "paradoxically makes the author an author who is not responsible to anyone" (Derrida 1995, 28). As Culler explains in his reading of this passage, Derrida links the political significance of literature to the status of fiction, as the realm where reference is suspended or bracketed (2005, 873), making it impossible to exact from the author a responsibility as to the claims to referential "truth" made in a given text.

consideration of how, in the course of therapy, self-narration takes the form of a confession that overwrites previous versions of the patient's life story: "The past, in other words was a lie, and the present is the cure in the form of truthful, reliable self-narration" (ibid). This, Currie claims, complicates the status of the confession and the confessant, rather than producing closure through retrospective revelation: "But in the act of self-narration, the unreliability of the narrator merely takes a new form, remembering the past not as it was, but in the light of the present. In order to tell the truth about a life, one must tell a lie about the truth" (ibid).

Confessing a lie is literally what happens in *God Help the Child*, apparently reversing the insincerity of a previous speech act and restoring the balance between self-narration and actual events within the diegetic world, in the attempt to clarify any gaps or blanks in the causal sequence leading characters to the moment of the confession itself. This sense of completing the right or true version of what happened is strongly evoked by the narrator as a rebirth: "she remained in Booker's bed, eyes closed, enjoying a fresh vitality and blazing clarity. Having confessed Lula Ann's sins she felt newly born" (Morrison 162). However, as suggested by Currie, the new narrative superimposed on the previous one only complicates the reconstruction of narrative sequence. Rather than helping readers to readjust their interpretation of previous events in the face of this new information—that Bride never actually saw Sofia abusing any children—the revelation of her lie obscures the identification of the events in the story by pointing at many of its loose threads.

As mentioned in the preceding section, little or nothing in *God Help the Child* would change if the act of revelation of her secret on Bride's part was to be eliminated from the narrative. Similarly, nothing would have changed if her testimony against Sofia Huxley had been based on an actual occurrence: her real witnessing of her abuses. She would still have been marked by that experience and by her mother's positive reaction to it, showing affection and pride for her for the first time; she would have evolved to become a woman immunized against racial hatred, able to turn abjection into desire for her exotic blackness; Sofia would still have been imprisoned, visited by Bride upon her release and would have reacted violently against her; Booker would have equally disapproved of this visit, abandoned Bride and later be reconciled on the reconsideration of his own selfishness and incomplete working out of his own trauma.

Several aspects of the storyline become problematic in the light of Bride's confession, remaining unexplained or undecidable. These truly constitute the text's secret in a Derridean sense, for "the readability of the text is structured by the unreadability of the secret, that is, by the inaccessibility of a certain intentional meaning or of a wanting-to-say in the consciousness of the characters" (Derrida 1992, 152). The narrative never fully discloses at least two key aspects related to Bride's revelation, which make it ultimately unreadable:

First, it is never made completely clear whether Lula Ann's accusation was in the condition of witness or victim of Sofia's alleged crime—the sections of the novel in which Bride and then Sweetness talk about it talk about her “performance” as a witness but nothing else (Morrison 30, 42). Later, when Bride tells Brooklyn about it, she focuses on her witnessing of Sofia's actions, but not on her potential implication in them: “I saw her do it” (46). As a witness, Bride's feelings of guilt and the need to atone for her responsibility in bringing Sofia to jail are not entirely justified, in the sense that hers was only one testimony among several others provided by other children. The question of whether Sofia Huxley was ultimately innocent of child molestation remains unanswered, for even if she acts as narrator in two chapters in the novel, she never claims her innocence or discusses the sentence she was given. Two fragments of the text are relevant in underscoring the ultimate undecidability of her case. The first, from one of the chapters narrated by Sofia herself, making reference to the children's testimony upon Bride's visit: “She was one of the students who testified against me, one of the ones who helped kill me, take my life away. How could she think cash would erase fifteen years of life as death?” (69-70). The second, in Booker's account of Bride's confession to his aunt, in which Sofia's innocence is suggested: “A big lie she told when she was a kid that helped put an innocent woman in prison. A long sentence for child rape *the woman never did*” (156; emphasis added). The first can be read coherently along the lines of both interpretations, thus underscoring the “perpetual secret” of what happened (Miller 2002, 72); the second introduces the possibility that she was actually innocent, but this is never confirmed anywhere else in the text, by the external narrator or by Bride herself.

The second undecidable aspect of the causal chain established in the text affects the disclosure of Bride's motivation in accusing Sofia. At a mid point in the novel readers learn that his was actually the second time she had told her mother about witnessing child abuse, the first time being when she saw the landlord rape a neighbor child (Morrison 2015, 54). Accusing Sofia was actually a repetition of her previous accusation of the landlord. It is never fully explained in the text why Sweetness' reactions to each occurrence are diametrically opposed. While in the first case “she was furious” (54) at Lula Ann, the second time she admits that her denunciation “made me proud as a peacock” (41-2). Although her silence in the first case could be explained in terms of her practical fear of being kicked out by the landlord, her support of her daughter in the second case seems incoherent and is never explained in the text. The only possible explanation found in the text could be framed as a sort of racial revenge, as Sweetness states “It's not often you see a little black girl take down some evil whites” (42). In addition, this opens the question as to how and why does Bride accuse Sofia, when she was not believed the first time she accused someone of child

rape. This part of the story is completely left out of the narration, but it forces readers to reconstruct it on the basis of later events.

I would argue that Bride's confession displaces the focus from the event witnessed to her reasons to share her witnessing. Claiming that she did it to get her mother's attention and affection actually discloses another traumatic experience in her childhood, namely, her perception that her mother abhorred her: "I always knew she didn't like touching me. I could tell. Distaste was all over her face when I was little and she had to bathe me" (31).<sup>9</sup> The result of her accusation actually transforms this relationship, and Sweetness is said to become "kind of motherlike" (32) during the trial. A cause-effect relation is established, therefore, between Bride's action and her mother's reaction, but this seems incoherent on the basis of textual evidence about previous actions of the same kind (i.e. previous accusations of adults committing abuses on children). It seems, then, that the production of causality works in this regard exactly as described by Culler in reference to the story of *Oedipus*: because Sweetness behaved like a proud mother when her daughter testified against Sofia Huxley, the cause for her behavior is retroactively established in the testimony itself.

## V. Conclusion: Literary secrets

Ultimately, Bride's confession works as a sort of "purloined letter", by revealing a secret, making it readable precisely in its unreadability. Bride's confession stands in the text as "a moment of self-deconstruction in which the supposed priority of event to discourse is inverted" (Culler 2002, 183). Confessing her previous lie laying open her secret, she evinces that her motivation for lying in the first place, the making of her primal phantasy, remains inaccessible. In this sense, Bride forever takes her secret with her, but Morrison's construction of the novel confirms, in fact, the truth of the secret, the secret of literature, as expressed by Derrida: "there is no sense in wondering what actually happened [...] As these fictional characters have no consistency, no depth beyond their literary phenomenon, the absolute inviolability of the secret they carry depends first of all on the essential superficiality of their phenomenality" (1992, 153).

*God Help the Child* actually works in a way pretty similar to the narrative mechanism identified by Derrida in Baudelaire's short story "Counterfeit Money". In both, a confession is placed as the turning point in the narration, forcing a reconsideration of everything narrated before. In both, the nature of this confession is problematic, as it undoes a previously established sequence of events and forces a reinterpretation on the part of the reader in the light of the lie confessed. In both, finally, the status of a primal act remains undecidable.

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9. As I have argued in the essay "The Secret of Bride's Body in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*" (forthcoming), the nature of this trauma is explained along the lines of Sweetness' interiorized racism, which leads her to reject her daughter on the basis of her dark skin color.



The entire story, then, is perceived as a lie or a counterfeit coin, as a fiction fabricated by a character whose disclosure of the fake character of everything that came before in the text destabilizes the entire narration. Derrida's words regarding "Counterfeit Money" could be well applied to *God Help the Child*: "What happens to the beggar and to the friend of the narrator, what in effect passes or comes to pass between them seems, at first glance, to constitute *the central event of the narrative*. But *the repercussions of this gesture appears only in a discourse*, in the friend's triumphant confession when he says to the narrator: 'It was the counterfeit coin'" (1992, 119).

Finally, it could be argued that Morrison's novel is constructed as a self-defeating revelation structure, one in which the blank spaces in the sequence of events, and particularly the undecidability as to the status of the key one working as primal event in the story (did Sofia Huxley abuse her pupils or not? Did Bride see it or not?) underscore the way in which a literary text is constricted by its very textuality. We may conclude then with Culler, that in this novel, "the secret center that appears to explain everything folds back on the work, incorporating an external position from which to elucidate the whole in which it also figures" (*On Deconstruction* 198-199).

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